

Can doomscrolling trigger an existential crisis?

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In a world-first study on the impact of doomscrolling from an existential perspective, Flinders University researchers warn that habitual checking of disturbing stories on social media is linked with changes to how we

view humankind and the meaning of life.

Doomscrolling is where people spend a lot of time scrolling through traumatic news on social media such as shootings, terrorism and conspiracies, often to the point where it becomes addictive.

The new study reveals that doomscrolling makes people more likely to feel suspicious and distrustful of other people and form the impression that life lacks meaning. The research is [published](#) in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*.

"Doomscrolling can have some dire consequences on our [mental health](#) and well-being leaving us feeling stress, anxiety, despair and questioning the meaning of life," says lead author, Reza Shabahang from the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

"Viewing [negative news](#) on social media has become a source of vicarious trauma, where someone has a negative psychological impact even though they did not experience the trauma themselves.

"By being exposed to images and information about [traumatic events](#), people have been found to experience symptoms similar to [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) such as anxiety and despair."

Researchers surveyed 800 [university students](#) from two distinctly diverse cultures, an Eastern collective culture (Iran) and a Western individualistic culture (the United States), to explore how excessive negative news consumption on social media can impact their thoughts and feelings relating to their existence.

Participants were asked to respond on how often they doomscrolled through social media, how anxious they felt about their existence, whether they believed that the world is a fair place, and how they felt

about humanity.

"We wanted to see if there were any connections between doomscrolling and subsequent thoughts and feelings about humankind and the importance of life," says Shabahang.

Doomscrolling was associated with existential anxiety—worries about their existence, life and death—in both Iranian and American samples and emerged as a significant predictor of misanthropy—dislike of people—in the Iranian sample.

"When we're constantly exposed to negative news and information online, it can threaten our beliefs when it comes to our own mortality and the control we have over our own lives.

"Moreover, doomscrolling can negatively affect how we view the people and world around us," he says.

Shabahang says that the study is a timely reminder to be mindful of our online habits and to take regular breaks from social media and exposure to negative news.

"We suggest that people pay attention to how much time they are spending on social media and to be aware of the impact it is having on their emotions, thoughts and feelings, especially when it comes to negative news and events," he says.

"It's a good idea to keep track of how much time you spend doomscrolling and start making changes to reduce that time if it's problematic.

"By becoming more aware of our online habits, such as doomscrolling, and taking [small steps](#) to address them, it could help with improving our

overall mental well-being," he adds.

More information: Reza Shabahang et al, Doomscrolling evokes existential anxiety and fosters pessimism about human nature? Evidence from Iran and the United States, *Computers in Human Behavior Reports* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100438](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2024.100438)

Provided by Flinders University

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